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ABSTRACT

The vowel system of the educated rural sedentary dialect of the West Bank (Palestine) is analyzed from a generative phonological point of view and in relation to three phonological processes: monophthongization, centralization, and pharyngealization. The results of the analysis are compared with Mark Cowell's broader 1964 analysis of Syrian Arabic. Cowell's vowel description is found to be inadequate for the dialect studied here, differing from the present analysis in its degree of precision in locating certain vowels. (MSE)

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PALESTINIAN ARABIC VOWELS

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Cowell's excellent A Reference Grammar of Syrian Arabic,[1] based on the dialect of Damascus, and published in 1964, is still the best work on the phonology, morphology, and syntax of the urban dialects of the Greater Syrian area (Western Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine). In my opinion, it has been supplemented but not surpassed by later works such as Ambros's Damascus Arabic,[2] published in 1977.

It might be asked, then, what the purpose of this paper is, if Cowell's work is still considered so satisfactory. Well, unlike Cowell, I intend to describe a different dialect: the educated rural sedentary dialect of the West Bank, the dialect of most of our students at Birzeit. And also unlike Cowell, I intend to describe only a small fraction of that dialect, that is the vowel system. This fraction will, however, be described in a way different from Cowell's, by making use of the vowel diagram in Gimson's An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English,[3] and certain ideas and formalizations derived from the school of Generative Phonology. I hope, in this way, to achieve greater precision in my description than Cowell, and lay the basis, or at least the first stone of the basis, for future work of this sort on Palestinian Arabic (PA).

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The description of the vowels will be in relation to three phonological processes: monophthongization, centralization, and pharyngealization, which will also be the headings of the different sections:-

Monophthongization

There are five long vowels in PA, two of them being monophthongisations of Classical Arabic (CA) diphthongs:-

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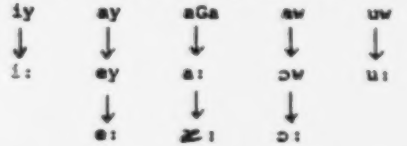
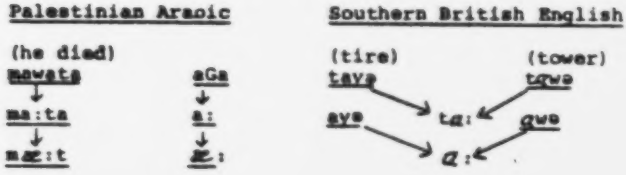
It could also be argued, on the basis of the conventional orthography, that the remaining three long vowels are themselves monophthongizations of the underlying representations in the period when the CA orthography was established:-



This kind of sound change is not uncommon in the evolution of languages, and analogous processes in the derivation of the modern English vowel system are extensively described by Gimson and by Chomsky and Halle in The Sound Pattern of English.[4] In fact, there is an excellent analogy to the derivation of PA /æ:/ in the "monophthongization of /aɪ/ and /ɑʊ/ and their coalescence with /ɑ:/,"[5] mentioned by Gimson:-



The present reality of the PA long vowels seems to me to be similar to that described by Cowell. My account of them, however, will not be identical to his, having different examples from a different dialect, and relying on a vowel diagram for their identification rather more than on verbal descriptions. I shall also not discuss the pharyngealized equivalents of these 'plain' vowels here, preferring to leave them to the later section on pharyngealization:-

i: high front unrounded
Examples: bi:t Go home! ti:n fig

e: mid-high front unrounded
Examples: be:t house te:s billy goat

æ : mid-low front unrounded

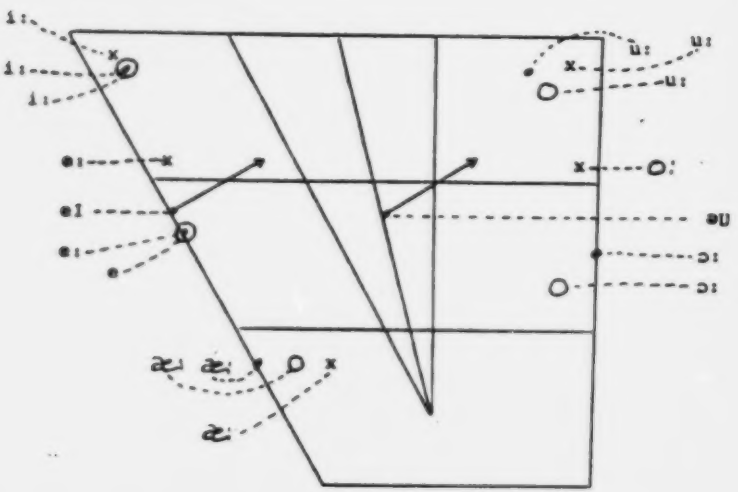
Examples: mæ:t he died tæ:b he repented

ɔ: mid-low back rounded

Examples: mɔ:t death tɔ:fe toffee

i: high back rounded

Examples: mu:t Go away! tu:t mulberry



x = Syrian Arabic (Cowell)

• = British English (Gimson)

O = Palestinian Arabic (this paper)

As can be seen from the diagram, the main differences between my account of PA vowels and Cowell's account of Syrian Arabic vowels appears to be the levelling (monophthongization) of the CA diphthongs. Cowell claims SA levels the CA /ay/ at a position "higher than the first part of the English a (in date),"[5] whereas there appears to me no difference between PA /e:/ and the much lower /ɛ/ in British English bet. There is a difference in length, but that is another matter.

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Equally, on the other side of the diagram, there is a wide discrepancy in the location of the levelled CA diphthong /æɤ/. Cowell makes a claim that is true for both SA and PA, that "long ō differs markedly from the English o in sole,"[6] but his following statement that long ō "is similar to the French o in cote"[7] appears to be only true of SA. I find the PA levelling of the CA /æɤ/ to be even lower and slightly more central than the /ɔː/ in British English nought.

Centralisation

The short vowels of PA strike me as being much more centralised than the SA short vowels described by Cowell. In fact, with the exception of the short vowel /ɛ/, which he describes as higher and fronter than the long vowel /ɛː/, the other short vowels are described as "much the same in quality"[8] as their long counterparts. This fact could account for the discrepancy in the inventories of the short vowels in either dialect. For Cowell describes six short vowels, including /ə/ as a functionally distinct vowel:-

i e ɛ o u ə

whereas I can only detect three, with the maximally central vowel /ə/ as the neutralised version of them when they are unstressed:-

$$\left\{\begin{matrix} \text{I} \\ \text{ɛ} \\ \text{U} \end{matrix}\right\} \longrightarrow \text{ə} \Big/ \left[\overline{\text{-stress}}\right]$$

The non-appearance of /ə/ and /ɔ/ in the PA short vowel inventory is probably due to the centralised quality of the PA short vowels, for if /ə/ and /ɔ/ were centralised, they would come perilously near to /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ respectively, and would be barely distinguishable from them (distinctness decreasing with centralisation):-

i e ɛ o u
↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓
I ≃ ë ɛ̈ ö ≃ U

Once again, what is said in this section about the PA short vowels refers to the plain versions; their pharyngealised equivalents will be discussed under the section on pharyngealisation:-

I mid-high front central unrounded

Examples: sIt lazy tIf Spit!

ɛ̈ mid-low front central unrounded

Examples: kɛ̈t he brushed (sthg off) tɛ̈f he spat

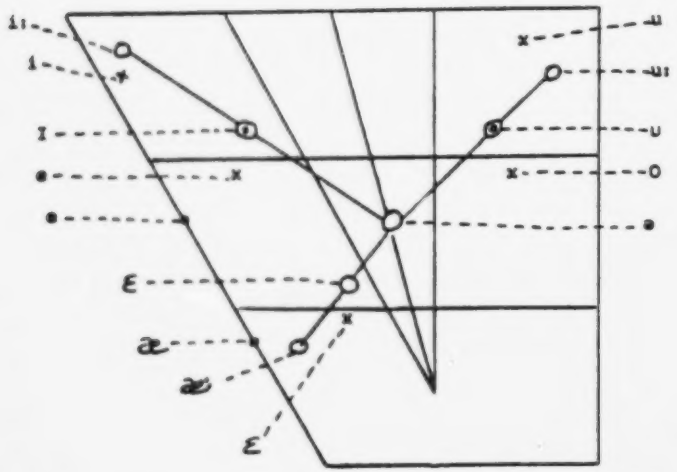
U mid-high back central unrounded

Examples: kUt Brush (sthg off)! tUk Knock (the ash off)!

ə mid-central unrounded

Examples: kətəːb book kəməːn also

bəstəːn garden



x = Syrian Arabic (Cowell)

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Pharyngealization

Despite Cowell's claim that "the term 'pharyngealization,' which has sometimes been used instead of 'velarization,' is even more misleading,"[9] it has since become the commonly accepted interpretation, in phonetic terms, for what the early Arab grammarians called 'emphasis,' as a result of acoustic analyses such as that described by Al-Ani in Arabic Phonology.[10]

But whereas the exact area of the secondary articulation is now well established, the exact number of pharyngealized consonants in the various Arabic dialects does not seem so well established. It seems to me that pharyngealized consonants should be grouped into three categories (the constituents of which will vary for each dialect):-

1. Pharyngealised consonants like CA ṣ ḍ ṭ ẓ with plain counterparts.
2. Pharyngealised consonants like CA ḳ without plain counterparts.
3. Pharyngealised consonants which are only pharyngealised as a result of assimilation with a neighbouring pharyngealised consonant.

Thus, by simplifying the context to one of CVC where the first C is the consonant to be investigated, V is an a-type vowel (described to the informant merely as 'alif'), and the last consonant is a known plain consonant such as /ṭ/, the constituents of the three categories can be discovered by going through the alphabet.

By employing this method with my informants, I reached the following conclusions:-

a) The constituents of 1 (above) were: ṣ ḍ ṭ ẓ
b) The sole constituent of 2 (above) was ḳ . - CA ḳ was invariably fronted to a k, which therefore took a different vowel.
c) The labials, dentals, and palatals could all be pharyngealised by assimilation.

The next procedure was to establish the exact qualitative change involved in the pharyngealisation of the vowel by assimilation to a neighbouring pharyngealised consonant, the process described in the following rule:-

$$V \longrightarrow \overset{\text{v}}{:} / \left\{ \begin{matrix} \text{—} \\ \text{ḳ} \end{matrix} \quad \begin{matrix} \text{ḳ} \\ \text{—} \end{matrix} \right\}$$

This was done by having my informants read off two lists of words, all currently used in the PA dialect under investigation. The lists were constructed to contrast the vocalic environments of /t/ and /ṭ/, both when the vowel preceded and when it succeeded.

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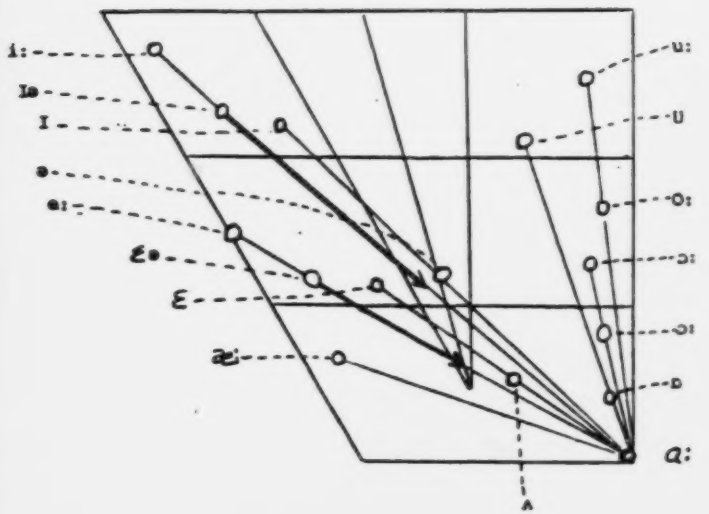
The lists were as follows:-

mulberry	توت
Go around (the Kaaba)!	طوف
toffee	توفي
collar	طوق
fig	تين
mad	طين
billy-goat	تيس
bird	طير
Spit!	بُصْ
medicine	طب
he spat	بَصَ
he knocked	طَق
Knock (ash off)!	بُصّ
Shoot!	طُخ
he repented	تاب
he went down	طاح

Go away!	موت
apron	فوطه
death	موت
walk	شوط
Go home!	بيت
fame	صيط
house	بَيْت
thread	خيط
lady	بِت
cat	كَت
he brushed (sthg off)	كَتّ
he put	حَط
Brush (sthg off)!	كُت
Put!	حُط
he died	مات
dish	جاط



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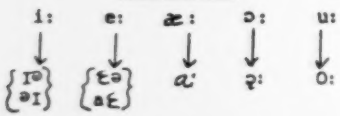
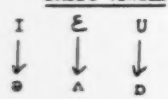
Beside Cowell's wholly inadequate description of the quality of the pharyngealized variants of the long and short vowels as "a somewhat retracted sound,"[11] I have tried to locate the PA vowels exactly. Obviously the movement is one of lowering and backing in the direction of /ɑ:/. The only problem appears to be one of distinctness, for if all the vowels are moving the same direction they will tend to lose their qualitative distinctness. The solution in PA seems to have been to have differential stopping points along the route to /ɑ:/, and in some cases, noticeably in the case of the long high front vowels, but also slightly apparent in the case of long high back vowels, to diphthongize:-

Long Vowels

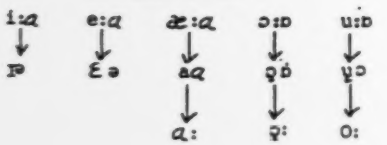


Short Vowels

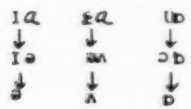


This diphthongization not only overcomes the problem of indistinctness (differentiating, for example, /i:/ from /I/, which are both moving along the same track), but is also, probably, a natural result of the physical difficulty the tongue has in moving rapidly from the most high front position in the mouth to the most low back. In fact, it could be argued, as it was in the section on monophthongization with regard to the long vowels, that the underlying representations of all these pharyngealized vowels are diphthongs, which are then monophthongized or not, differentially, to maintain maximum distinctness from each other:-

Long Vowels



Short Vowels



Obviously, the direction of the diphthongal glide will depend on which element of the diphthong is contiguous with the pharyngealised consonant, that is whether the vowel is in a ÇVC environment or a CVÇ environment. This is a little tricky, however, as pharyngealization would normally spread either backwards or forwards through the vowel, thus creating a uniform pharyngealised environment: ÇVÇ. There is evidence, nevertheless, that a diphthong effectively blocks the diffusion of the pharyngealization, so that we have:-

/ç æ:c/ ⟶ [ç ɑ:ç]

but /ç i:c/ ⟶ [ç ɪə c] not /ç i:c/ ⟶ [ç ɪə ç] .

In conclusion, let me summarize the points I have made. Although Cowell's description of the vowels might be adequate for the urban SA dialect he has chosen, I have not found it totally adequate for the educated rural sedentary PA dialect I have chosen. Where it is precise, for example in its description of the long vowels, I have disagreed with it on the exact location of certain vowels, more particularly the vowels /ɑ:/ and /ɒ:/. Where it is imprecise, for example in its description of the pharyngealised vowels, I have attempted to provide a certain amount of precision by locating them on a vowel diagram and plotting the routes of postulated diphthongal glides down into the low back area. I have throughout also emphasized the phonological processes which I believe to be fundamental to an understanding of how the Arabic vowels have developed into their present phonetic shapes in the different Arabic dialects, that is: monophthongization, centralization, and pharyngealization.

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Notes

1. Cowell, Mark W., A Reference Grammar of Syrian Arabic, (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1964).

2. Ambros, Arne, Damascus Arabic, (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1977).

3. Gimson, A. C., An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English, (London: Edward Arnold, 1970).

4. Chomsky, N. and Halle, M., The Sound Pattern of English, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

5. Cowell, op. cit., p. 10.

6. Cowell, ibid.

7. Cowell, ibid.

8. Cowell, op. cit., pp. 9-12.

9. Cowell, op. cit., p. 6.

10. Al Ani, Salman H., Arabic Phonology, (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), pp. 44-58.

11. Cowell, op. cit., pp. 9-12.